DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 688 EC 300 444

TITLE Commonly Asked Questions: If a Disabled Person Needs a Communication System or a Computer, How Can They Select the Right Equipment?
INSTITUTION Wisconsin Univ., Madison. Trace Center.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 5p.; A product of the Trace Research and Development Center, Waisman Center and Department of Industrial Engineering.
AVAILABLE FROM University of Wisconsin, TRACE Research & Development Center, Waisman Center, 1500 Highland Ave., Madison, WI 53705-2280 (single copies free, subsequent copies $0.80).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Assistive Devices (for Disabled); *Communication Aids (for Disabled); *Disabilities; *Equipment Evaluation; *Evaluation Methods; Microcomputers; *Selection; Staff Role; Teamwork
IDENTIFIERS *Augmentative Communication Systems

ABSTRACT

Suggestions are offered to help disabled persons who need a communication system or computer to select the appropriate equipment. The importance of conducting a product evaluation during the process of selecting and adapting a computer is stressed. The role of various evaluation team members in performing product evaluations is described, including the interface specialist; communication specialist; seating, positioning, and mobility specialist; and mounting specialist. Methods for locating an evaluation center are discussed, followed by a checklist of services that should be provided by the evaluation center. Three organizational sources for further information are listed. (JDD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Trace Center

Trace Research and Development Center
Waisman Center and Department of Industrial Engineering
University of Wisconsin-Madison

A multidisciplinary research and resource center on technology and human disability

1500 Highland Avenue • Madison, Wisconsin 53705-2280 • (608) 262-6966 • TDD: (608) 263-5408 • FAX: (608) 262-8848

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
M. E Brady
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED333688

Commonly Asked Questions

If a disabled person needs a communication system or a computer, how can they select the right equipment?

In the past ten years or so, many technological devices have been created to assist people with disabilities. People have become much more aware of the existence of these devices, but big questions remain in most people's minds:

- How do I know what to buy?
- How can I be sure I won't make a mistake?

Although many assistive devices are very new, there are professionals who are familiar with them—and who can help you make the best possible decision about "what to get." In order to help a person select equipment, a professional will perform an *evaluation* (or assessment) for the person. In the evaluation, the professional looks at the person's needs, capabilities and resources; draws on knowledge of what equipment is available or could be constructed; consults with the person and their family or other support people; and, finally, makes a recommendation about what system would be best. This recommendation may also include plans for changes in the system as the person's situation changes.

There are many types of assistive devices, from power wheelchairs to electronic communication devices, but here we will discuss evaluations for two types of adaptive equipment: *communication systems* and *computer adaptations*. Evaluations for these two types of equipment are often similar. Many professionals who are experienced with one understand the other as well.

Why is an evaluation important?

Buying an assistive device is not as simple as, say, going shopping for a new hat. Like a hat, an assistive device needs to "fit" the owner, but there are also some big differences:

- *Figuring out what assistive device will "fit" involves many more complicated questions than "Does it look nice?" and "Is it a size 7-1/2?"* Some things that need to be considered are: How well could the person operate the device? What help will they need from friends and family? Will the device have to be custom modified to work properly? Professionals who do evaluations for assistive devices will be able to help you anticipate these questions and answer them—before you purchase a device. Afterwards it is often too late.
- *If you buy a new hat and then decide you don't like it, you can just exchange it or buy another.* Assistive devices are different: often money will only be available to purchase a device one time, and that device will be expected to last for many years. Prices can be very high: electronic communication devices, for example, can cost over $4,000.
- *Many kinds of hats are available for you to look at in stores.* It's much more difficult to find a place where you can try out assistive devices. A qualified evaluation center should have many different types of equipment for you to try, and people to help you decide. If you only know about one product, you can't make a choice. You need to see the equipment and try it, with someone there to help you make decisions. "Trying on" assistive devices usually *can't* be done just by looking at a catalog or talking to someone on the phone.

EC 300 444

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

- *The fanciest device isn't necessarily the best for you.* When you buy a hat, the only limit on how fancy it can be is how much you can afford. When first looking at assistive devices, many people assume they need the fanciest, most "high-tech" device. After a thorough evaluation, you may find that something simpler (and less expensive) is better.

- *You usually pay for a hat out of your own pocket.* Funding for assistive devices, on the other hand, may come from a variety of sources. An evaluation center should be able to help you pursue funding. You may also find that when you have an equipment recommendation from a qualified evaluation center, funding agencies are more willing to accept your requests for equipment funding.

Who performs evaluations?

Achieving the best match between individual and adaptive equipment generally requires that professionals with expertise in a number of areas participate together in the evaluation. The professional team members that are needed within a given evaluation will depend upon the types of needs and abilities the individual has.

When you're trying to find an evaluation team, remember: you're the customer. You should locate a team that has the background and experience needed to do a good job. Professional evaluation teams for augmentative communication and computer adaptation typically include the following individuals:

Interface Specialist

Generally having a background in occupational therapy, this member of the team works on the physical barriers that may prevent an individual from effectively using technology. The interface specialist figures out how the individual can best control a communication device or computer—for instance using keyboards with fingers, typing with a special head-mounted pointer, or pressing switches. Other important roles of this team member include providing training to improve individuals' physical skills, and assisting in developing effective ways to attach equipment to wheelchairs.

Communication Specialist

This individual will have a background in speech-language pathology and specific training and experience in augmentative communication. This member of the team will consider the individual's understanding of language, thinking skills, the ability to understand and use symbols (words, pictures, etc.), interaction skills, and speech. The communication specialist also assists in selection of vocabulary for communication devices.

Seating, Positioning and Mobility Specialist

This professional often has a background in physical or occupational therapy or rehabilitation engineering. He or she works to make certain that an individual is positioned properly in the wheelchair. Good positioning increases the individual's ability to physically use needed equipment.

Mounting Specialist

This individual frequently has a background in rehabilitation engineering. They are involved in activities such as attaching communication aids (electronic or non-electronic) to wheelchairs and devising ways for individuals to carry their communication aids. Input from other team members such as an occupational or physical therapist is critical.

Some team members may serve more than one of the functions described above, but the team as a whole needs to have all of those capabilities. There are also other individuals who are very important to the team: parents, other services providers (such as therapists, educators, vocational counsellors), and of course the individual who is being evaluated.

As the word "team" implies, members work together during an evaluation. Since it is difficult to get an accurate picture of any individual's needs and skills in just one visit, it is necessary to look at an evaluation as a process which frequently must be completed over the course of several sessions. In some instances, the individual may have to see the team—or specific members of the team—on an ongoing basis, in order to get help developing appropriate skills and strategies.

In any case, *the results of the evaluation should be more than just a recommendation for a specific piece of equipment.* Recommendations and follow-up services should also include strategies for making sure the equipment works effectively, plus a plan for completing the necessary training.

How can I find a clinic?

Since augmentative communication and computer access are new areas of specialization, the number of organizations with evaluation teams is limited. Also, because there is currently no single comprehensive listing of evaluation centers, it can be difficult to locate existing programs.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Still, it is worth making the search. Locating a good evaluation center can save you a lot of mistakes and backtracking. Over the next ten years, the number of centers with expertise in communication systems and computer adaptations is sure to increase, and better directories of service providers will be developed. It should therefore become easier and easier to find the services you need.

Here are some basic tips which will help you locate an evaluation center. This list is followed by a checklist of things to look for to tell if a center will serve all of your needs.

1) *Check into programs that you already know about.* Find out if the service providers you already work with offer the services you need. However, you shouldn't jump to the conclusion that they are the right choice. They may know something about augmentative communication, but not enough to provide a comprehensive evaluation. Use the checklist below to help you determine whether they can meet all your needs. It may be that you need to get an evaluation at a regional center of some kind, with your regular local service providers attending the evaluation if possible and giving ongoing support after the evaluation.

2) *Contact state information offices.* Some states have comprehensive, state-wide directories of services for people with disabilities. Contact a state agency such as Health, Human Services, Vocational Rehabilitation or your Governor's Office on People with Disabilities to find out if your state offers such a directory. Even if it doesn't, someone at these agencies may be able to provide you with leads in your search.

3) *Check out national sources of information.* Although right now there is no single, comprehensive national source of information on rehabilitation services, there are some resources that are useful. First of all, the Trace Center publishes a list of "Service Centers for Augmentative Communication and Computer Access." This list is not comprehensive, but it does list many of the major evaluation centers in the country. Second, you might want to contact the National Information Service at the University of South Carolina. They have information on many of the service centers around the country and the types of services those centers provide. Finally, RESNA (a national association on rehabilitation technology) has compiled a directory of its members, including information on the services they provide. (Contact addresses are provided below.) Again, once you've located evaluation centers, contact them and use the checklist below to determine if they offer all the services you will need.

4) *Talk to others "in the know."* People with disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, and disability-related service organizations may know of someone who specializes in augmentative communication and computer access in your area.

5) *Contact makers of communication devices.* Some companies will be willing to send a service representative to allow you to try out a device. This can be helpful, but it's not a substitute for a thorough, impartial evaluation. Remember, the company is trying to sell a product; it may not be the right one for you. A device from another manufacturer may serve your needs better—or perhaps you don't need a high-tech device at all.

Don't give up!

It can be difficult to find the right evaluation center. You may have to compromise between checking out all the avenues and finding services right away. You may also have to compromise between going to the best possible clinic and going to one that's nearby. Remember, however, that your ultimate goal is to find the best services possible, not just to "find something." Use all the resources you can locate, and don't give up just because it seems like a lot of trouble, or because you think surely you must have looked everywhere. In the long run, a good evaluation will save you time and money.

Contact addresses

National Information Service
Center for Development Disabilities
Benson Building
University of South Carolina
Columbia, SC 29208
(800) 922-9234

RESNA
1101 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 857-1199

Trace Center
S-151 Waisman Center
1500 Highland Ave.
Madison, WI 53705
(608) 262-6966

(continued. . .)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Checklist of Evaluation Center Services

What should you look for when selecting an evaluation center? Here's a list of key points to consider. This list has been simplified to make it easier to use; don't forget any details of your situation that might be different or more complex. In other words, this list isn't meant to be your only criteria—just a way of making sure you don't miss something important.

❑ *1. Does the center have a complete evaluation team?*

Ideally, a team doing augmentative communication assessments should have a complete team. They should have expertise in all of the areas described on page 2 of this pamphlet (interface specialist, communication specialist, etc.). Some team members may play more than one role. If the team does not "cover all the bases," they should at least be able to involve outside people (such as a school occupational therapist) in the evaluation process.

❑ *2. Do they have the necessary facilities and equipment?*

An evaluation center should have available a wide variety of equipment to determine what's best. If they have only two models of communication device, for instance, they aren't going to be able to check out many possibilities—there are over 20 different models on the market today.

❑ *3. How much experience do they have with the type of evaluation you need?*

You should ask how long the team has been working together, and how much education and experience the various members have.

❑ *4. Can they provide follow-up services?*

People frequently need more than just an initial evaluation in order to serve all their needs. If a communication system is technically sophisticated, for instance, some training in how to operate it will be necessary. Ongoing work may have to be done to expand and improve the user's vocabulary. The system might also have to be replaced when the user's situation changes: when they lose physical capabilities; when their motor control improves; when they learn to read. If the center cannot provide follow-up, ask them how they can help you arrange to have someone else do it.

❑ *5. Can they do repairs or modifications?*

Once again, there's more to developing a system than just buying one and plugging it in. Equipment often needs to be modified. It will eventually need to be repaired as well.

❑ *6. Can they help you find funding to pay for equipment and services?*

An important role of an evaluation center is to help you locate sources of funding for the equipment they recommend. Ask about a center's experience and success in finding funding.

❑ *7. How soon can they see you?*

You should realize that well-known, well-qualified evaluation centers often have waiting lists, simply because there aren't enough of these centers to serve everyone. You don't want the wait to be too long, but don't pass up a good center just because there's a wait.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE